

## Exiles' plane to symbolize Cuban thirst for freedom

*A plane that was used by a Cuban family to flee to Florida, then auctioned to satisfy part of a multimillion-dollar judgment against the Cuban government, is being transformed into the Cuban Monument of Freedom.*

BY ELAINE DE VALLE  
edevalle@herald.com

Published by The Miami Herald on May 9, 2004 (Miami, FL)

A vintage Cuban government-owned crop-dusting plane seized by U.S. court order in a rare judgment against Fidel Castro's regime will finally get some use -- as a work of art.

The Russian-made Antonov An-2 'Colt' in which a pilot and his family made a mad dash to freedom will be on display later this month as part of an installation intended to symbolize the mass flight from the island.

After the eight Cubans landed in Key West in November 2002, the plane was seized to satisfy a \$27 million judgment won in 2001 by the ex-wife of a Cuban spy.

But the plane, which the new owner had hoped would bring \$30,000 to \$60,000, failed to sell at auction.

"We always envisioned something special for the plane," said Scott Leeds, the attorney who represented Ana Margarita Martinez and later bought the plane from her.

"You can't fly it. The FAA would never allow that," he said.

So it sat in storage in Key West for about 18 months until a conversation with a local artist generated the idea of turning the plane, with its patchwork of old parts, into art.

Last week, a pair of volunteers disassembled the yellow plane and brought it to the Elizabeth Virrick hangar in Coconut Grove, loaned to the project by the city of Miami, where they put the pieces back together.

### THE GRAND DESIGN

Xavier Cortada, an artist renowned for public murals, began painting the plane Friday. He told The Herald he envisions painting open mouths to signify the lack of freedom of expression.

He will also surround the plane with 45 painted trunks numbered 1959 to 2004 for the years of the Fidel Castro regime. They will be filled with letters from exiles about their personal experiences leaving Cuba. Cortada is soliciting letters now and will invite visitors to the exhibit to write letters, too.

"As an artist, my job is to look at my world and express it for others to see," Cortada said. "But with this project, I thought, 'Maybe it's not just my expression that is important here. Maybe it's their expression that is of utmost value.' "

So he and Leeds are asking Cuban exiles to contribute to what they are calling the Cuban Monument of Freedom. The letters should state what one left behind and what one found upon arriving in exile -- whether in the United States or elsewhere.

He is eager to see the similarities and differences between the different waves.

"Because, of course, what my dad found here when he came in '62 is a lot different than what the rafters found," Cortada said. "He found signs that said 'No Dogs. No Cubans.' "

"When my cousin got here [more recently], he found a place that had signage all over the place in Spanish," he said.

"But I think they both left the same things behind: a broken family, your homeland, your hopes and dreams. And that's what this is about," the artist said, "so I can make a case, if you will, why 45 years of exiles have left that island."

He and others supporting the monument's creation say they expect it to be a powerful symbol capable of delivering an important message to a world that grew cynical toward Cuban exiles during the Elián González saga.

"Every time we saw one of those Chevrolet rafts in the news and it was sunk by the Coast Guard," Leeds said, "it was our reaction and the community's reaction to be outraged. 'Why are they sinking that monument?' What they were sinking was a symbol of the struggle for freedom that these people are so desperate for, they are willing to risk their lives."

The plane signifies that, too, he said.

"We didn't want it to just fall idle or go quietly into the night," Leeds said. "We really wanted it to be a living monument to freedom."

After it's unveiled May 19, on the eve of Cuban Independence Day, Leeds and Cortada hope it will find a permanent home at a museum in South Florida or the Smithsonian Institute, which has already expressed an interest in acquiring the letters.

## A DUE FATE

It is a fitting use of the plane, said Martínez, who won it as a partial settlement of her lawsuit against Cuba in which she claimed it was government-sanctioned rape when her spy husband, Juan Pablo Roque, had sexual relations with her. She didn't know she was married to a Cuban agent until he returned to the island one day before Cuban MiGs shot down two Brothers to the Rescue planes, she said.

Now, she says, she is thrilled with her prize's fate.

"It's ideal," she told The Herald. "It's something that involves both the cultural world and the cause. It's something that can create awareness outside of Miami.

"It's very innovative and something the entire community can participate in."